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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fleck, C. (2013). Lewis A. Coser: a stranger within more than one gate. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 49(6), 951-968. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-416035>

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## Lewis A. Coser—A Stranger within More Than One Gate

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**Abstract:** This article presents a short portrait of Lewis A. Coser (1913–2003), the American sociologist who became renowned as one of the founders of ‘conflict sociology’. Born in Berlin, Coser had to leave his homeland for political reasons and he spent the years before Nazi Germany’s invasion of France in Paris. Coser then fled to the United States and started his academic career there at the College of the University of Chicago. An abridged version of the PhD thesis he wrote at Columbia University was published as *The Functions of Social Conflict*, which earned him recognition, a promotion, and made him a figure of authority for sociologists in the 1960s. In this article the author draws on archival materials to examine Coser’s life, major publications and achievements. His intellectual trajectory from Marxism to Mertonian Functionalism, his strong commitment to a Weberian view of the separation of politics from scholarship, the breadth of his erudition in literature and classical sociological theory, and his lifelong place in New York intellectual circles and intellectual magazines made him an extraordinary figure even amongst his contemporaries.

**Keywords:** Lewis A. Coser, conflict sociology, refugee scholars, functionalism, American sociology, intellectuals

*Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, 2013, Vol. 49, No. 6: 951–968

What appears to me to be one major guiding thread in my life, and largely in my work as well, is the fact that in a variety of ways, under many different circumstances, I have been a ‘stranger within the gate’. [Coser 1988b: xii]

Should a scholar’s dissertation, finished at the relatively mature age of 41, become a bestseller in its field and a ‘must read’ for students, its author can be deemed to have made it into the elite ranks of his discipline. If the same scholar follows his first book with more than a dozen other books, numerous articles and countless book reviews, it could nevertheless still happen that he will be ever known by subsequent generations, based on references to his name in textbooks, only for his very first work. The scholar who fits this very profile, Lewis A. Coser, today, as we mark his centennial, and ten years after his death, deserves that his contribu-

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tion to sociology be remembered more broadly than by the double C that stands for 'Coser & conflict'.

When in the 1960s Coser became a figure of authority for the then young and rebellious cohort of sociologists, it was primarily for *The Functions of Social Conflict*, first printed in 1956, but also because he recognised similarities between the convictions of his own youth and those of the next generation. Unlike others of his generation, Coser remained a man of the political left for his entire life, but was one who tried to take into consideration the blind spots and wilful thinking of the left. Both his theoretical outlook, which disavowed equilibrium, consensus and harmony, and his ability and inclination to talk to members of the 'disobedient generation' [Sica and Turner 2005; cf. Coser 1976] contributed to Coser's ascendancy within US sociology. When he came to New York in 1941 he certainly did not expect that he would end his professional career as a professor emeritus, looking back on the honours he had received from his fellow sociologists.

Coser was born Ludwig Alfred Cohen on 27 November 1913 in Berlin and died on 8 July 2003 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> During the first two decades of his life he lived the comfortable life of a son of a wealthy Jewish banker and a Protestant mother in a middle-class neighbourhood close to Kurfürstendamm. His father changed the family name to shield them from anti-Semitism and according to Coser's recollection for him at least it worked. He mentioned on several occasions that he never experienced anti-Semitic slurs or insults and in personal conversation added with a wink that he was only ever targeted by anti-smokerism. As a high school student, attending Kaiser-Friedrich-Gymnasium, Coser showed a strong interest in fiction, was less engaged by routine school work, did not develop any bonds with his teachers and became politicised, reading the *Weltbühne* and attending meetings of left-leaning groups. After Coser dropped out of high school without a diploma in 1932, his father sent the young man to England to learn English to prepare him to step into his father's shoes as a banker. The Nazi Party's rise to power in Germany in 1933 convinced Coser to move to Paris where he lived for the next eight years. His father, who himself later managed to escape to Shanghai, was only initially able to provide him with financial support, as the Nazi authorities very soon prohibited the transfer of money outside the country. After that Coser's existence became very much like the lives of his fellow exiled comrades. In Paris he earned a living performing various menial jobs because foreigners were not allowed to hold regular employment. His main activities were twofold: on the one hand, he engaged in exile politics, frequenting mainly Trotskyist circles, which was anything but harmless given the

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<sup>1</sup> The biographical information is from Coser's two short autobiographical remarks [1988a, 1993], several interviews with him [Rosenberg 1984; Coser 1989], obituaries [Kaesler 2004, 2007; Kalberg 2003; Martin 2003; Rule 2003; Scheuch 2003], and the recollections of fellow sociologists [Blau et al. 2003]. Unfortunately, no biography exists and the Wikipedia entry is anything but complete.

presence of NKWD agents and a strong Stalinist faction, both in the German exile milieu and in French party politics. On the other hand, Coser managed to attend lectures at the Sorbonne, where he finally started to become a sociologist, but only after an interlude spend studying comparative literature. Coser recalled that when he informed his literature professor that he was thinking about writing his dissertation on a comparison of English, French and German novels from the 19th century by studying 'the various ways in which the different social structures of these countries influenced various patterns of growth of the novel [the professor] threw up his hands in horrified surprise and almost shouted: "Social structure, my friend, is not a subject of study in comparative literature, that is something to be studied in sociology"' [Coser 1993: 2]. Consequently, Coser switched to sociology, but was not able to finish his dissertation during his remaining years in Paris.

Coser was not impressed by the Durkheimians of this period, Paul Fauconnet and Célestin Bouglé, because at the time he thought of himself as a Marxist who knew everything better than those he belittled as representatives of 'bourgeois sociology'. His participation in several discussion groups and conversations with fellow émigrés, and in particular his friendship with Henry Jacoby, who had escaped Nazi persecution, helped Coser to develop a unorthodoxly Marxist world view. Coser's life was probably saved by his devotion to the written word and his less overt engagement in party politics, as others in his milieu became victims of either Stalinist or Fascist persecution.<sup>2</sup> Coser's journalistic writings from these years, mostly published under pen-names, did not catch the attention of wider audiences, but they formed his self-image as a journalist-activist. After France's defeat, Coser was interned in one of the camps where German anti-Fascists and Nazis were imprisoned without differentiation as enemies. An American refugee assistance organisation provided Coser with a non-quota visa because he belonged to the group of high-risk political opponents of the Nazis. The visa enabled Coser to escape Nazi-ruled Europe at the last moment. He arrived penniless in New York.

Immediately after his arrival he wanted to express his thanks to those who helped him to escape. In the office of the International Rescue Committee he was introduced to the young woman who had been working on his case, Rose Laub, a fellow refugee from Europe who had come to the United States two years earlier from Antwerp. They fell in love and married soon after, a marriage which lasted for the next half century until Rose's death in 1994. The two Cosers shared not only political convictions and a family life with their two American-born children, but from the outset also their professional lives. They regularly discussed each other's drafts of writing and from time to time they wrote papers togeth-

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<sup>2</sup> The historian Hans Schafranek mentions Coser twice in his biography of an Austrian Trotskyist who was murdered by the Stalinist NKWD, without fully acknowledging Coser's later fame [cf. Schafranek 1988].

er. After Rose's death, Lew edited a volume with selected papers by her for a German translation and provided the volume with an informative introduction [R. L. Coser 1999].

However, Coser's first ten years in the United States were like those of the average refugee, earning his and his family's living first doing menial jobs and then working as a 'left-wing journalist' writing for several small magazines, before starting to work for agencies devoted to the war effort. Coser initially spent some time in an office in midtown Manhattan with other refugees who could not work officially for the US government because of their status as enemy aliens. Together they excerpted Nazi publications:

A bunch of literary scholars, Roman lawyers, lyrical poets, social workers, and others were put to work translating German newspaper reports on anything from the weather to the conditions of the potato crop and the newest releases of the Nazi movie industry. The job came to an end when the director of the office, a dyed-in-the-wool socialist economist,<sup>3</sup> left to cross the Mexican border because he was about to be drafted and couldn't face the possibility of perhaps having to shoot at his former Vienna school mates. [Coser 1988b: xv–xvi]

Lew Coser's entry into American academia—Rose had already started, having enrolled at Columbia University's graduate school in 1946 to do her PhD in sociology with Robert K. Merton—was highly unusual and the by-product of his involvement in the circles of what became known as the New York Intellectuals. According to Daniel Bell [1980: 129], besides Hannah Arendt, Coser was the only German refugee to become knighted as a member of this informal network of then mostly academically unaffiliated writers. Coser wrote under the pen-name Louis Clair for short-lived magazines like *Modern Review* and *The Progressive*, but also for media of longer-lasting repute, such as *The Nation*, *Partisan Review*, and *Politics*. What he learned there was discouraging, and he quite quickly had to bury his hopes of establishing himself as 'a kind of leftist Walter Lippmann'. On the other hand, these apprenticeship years improved his English proficiency, which is evident in all of Coser's later publications. They are extremely well written, without any jargon, and his command of English allowed him even to dismiss the English of some of his fellow sociologists for their lack of grace: C. Wright Mills, for example, receives a fail for his style: 'He [C. W. Mills] is a sociologist of considerable standing and has been exposed to the ways of the fraternity for a considerable time. Moreover, though by no means a stylist, he at least pays attention to style, and in this domain even unsuccessful effort must be rated above deliberate neglect.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This was Adolf Kozlik, see Rothschild's obituary [1965].

<sup>4</sup> Coser, in a review of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*, which appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1960, reprinted in Coser [1988a: 43–48], quote from p. 44.

During their early years in America, the professional ambitions of both Cosers were modest. When one of their friends attained the position of a German-language instructor at a minor college they thought they too might get such a position one day [Coser 1989: 195]. Things went differently. In the spring of 1948 one of Lew's then comrades, Nathan Glazer, called him and asked whether he knew David Riesman. Coser replied, 'No'. Riesman, a lawyer by education and the last clerk of Supreme Justice Louis Brandeis, had decided to switch fields from law to sociology and had started teaching at the College of the University of Chicago. Riesman was assigned to recruit several promising young people for the school's undergraduate programme. He interviewed Coser and asked him whether he would like to come to Chicago. Coser was inclined to accept but when Riesman announced that the field Coser would have to teach would be 'American history' he laughingly declined the invitation: 'Why on earth would a university in the "Wild West" hire someone from Berlin, and Paris, to teach American history to what I thought were "corn fed" youngsters reared in Midwestern small towns.' [Coser 1993: 4] A week later Coser received a call from the dean of the college about his coming to Chicago. Coser repeated that he was not competent to teach American history, but the dean replied that they had moved someone from sociology to history, so Coser could start teaching a basic social science course. Coser accepted and the Coser family moved to Chicago for the next two years. Needless to say, it was surprising that someone with no formal academic qualifications got a position at one of the leading American universities, but this was not completely unusual in those days. Since Coser was not striving for a career as a university man, he accepted the job, as he had with other jobs in previous years: without totally adjusting to the new environment. But he got hooked on the pleasures of teaching and the freedom to pursue his own research agenda. Forty years later he contributed a short reminiscence to a book on the role of general education, particularly in Chicago. Quoting one of Gertrude Stein's famous sayings, he illustrated the difference between undergraduate and graduate teaching as follows: 'The divisions [Chicago's departments] tried to produce answers, the College specialized in questions.' [Coser 1992: 164]

From Chicago he applied for a fellowship at Columbia University to begin graduate study in the 1950/1951 academic year. He had attended several summer school lectures at the university in previous years, and through Rose, who had enrolled there earlier, he had become acquainted with Robert K. Merton. A letter of recommendation from this then rising star in American sociology might have contributed to the success of Coser's application. The small age difference of just two years between the European cosmopolitan from an upper middle-class background and the son of Jewish Russian immigrants who had made his way up the academic ladder without any interference from world politics allowed the older Merton not only to serve as Coser's dissertation supervisor and mentor, to begin, but to become his good friend later on. Nevertheless, during his life Coser called himself a disciple of Merton, because Merton had introduced him to the function-

alist mode of sociological analysis. Later in his career Coser magnificently edited a festschrift devoted to his mentor [Coser 1975a].

Columbia's sociology department suited Coser perfectly. Its then relatively young faculty consisted of several later outstanding American sociologists and they all were animated by an 'enthusiasm, vigor, and excitement' very different to what Coser had experienced at the Sorbonne with its 'somnolent routine instruction' [Coser 1988b: xvii]. In addition, Columbia's sociologists showed more open-mindedness than any of the other leading American departments of that time. Europe and European social thought played a much more prominent role in Manhattan's Upper West Side than it did, for example, in Chicago or at Harvard, where the European tradition was only a part of heritage or a toolbox for system building as in the case of Talcott Parsons' work. Both Merton and Kingsley Davis, with whom Coser had planned to study, had been students of Parsons but did not pressure their own students to embrace the newly established structural-functionalism school of thought.

The cohort of graduate students and young instructors at Columbia encompassed some of his friends from New York intellectual circles, such as Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Lipset, C. Wright Mills, and others [cf. Merton 1994, 1998; Coser 1999b]. There he could be a truly 'marginal man' [Park 1967; cf. Hughes 1994], sitting on the fence in between different political camps, theory groups, and disciplines.

What appears to me to be one major guiding thread in my life, and largely in my work as well, is the fact that in a variety of ways, under many different circumstances, I have been a 'stranger within the gate.' That is, while never having been fully part of a specific community or group, I have yet belonged to a number of them. [Coser 1988b: xii]

Coser quickly approached Merton with a topic for his dissertation, which would not have fallen on as fertile ground with someone else.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Merton from

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<sup>5</sup> Merton once devoted a whole academic year to reading Simmel line by line in his seminar. Since this happened after Coser started his PhD thesis one could argue that Coser played a role in this. In a letter to Merton from 9 September 1952 Coser reported that he did the same at Brandeis in 1951: 'During the first semester of the last academic year I gave a seminar on Simmel's conflict in which 4 students and myself went through the article line by line and attempted to clarify the text. The students were undergraduates with almost no previous knowledge of sociological literature and with little sensitivity to theory. I think that the benefit to them consisted primarily of the experience of being forced to read a difficult text carefully—I think they learned to 'read' for the first time in their lives. To me the advantage was to be forced to give an attention to the text which went beyond that which one usually gives when reading a book carefully for one's own uses.' Robert K. Merton Papers, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Division (MS # 1439), series II.1, box 16, folder 4 Coser, Lewis A.



11 October 1949, Coser wrote that he intended to write 'on a few of the main themes in Simmel ... Reading Simmel's wonderful passages on "Das Geheimnis und die geheime Gesellschaft" led me to a rather different idea [than the ones practiced by Simmel scholars]. Would it not be more interesting to use some of Simmel's concepts in the investigation of a concrete problem?' The specific problem Coser mentioned was anything but a conventional application of Simmel's thoughts:

'It occurred to me that no *sociological* study of the structure and functioning of the Communist Party does as yet exist'. He added that such a study would 'present many difficulties'. It might not be manageable 'to do any "field-work" myself' and 'unanticipated political consequences and repercussions' are to be expected. But 'on the other hand, such a study will have to be done some day, the CP is certainly among the most significant sociological phenomena of our times. Also I probably would possess more "understanding" of the problem than most American sociologists. As to the data, I would think that quite a lot could be gathered from former members who outnumber present members by about 10 to 1. ... Furthermore, I would be interested in some of the essential characteristics of a political "sect" generally, it has always seemed somewhat incongruous to me that we possess such exhaustive treatments of religious sects, whereas almost nothing has been published on the political sect which certainly is today a more important formation.'<sup>6</sup>

We do not know whether Coser was aware of the fact that his dissertation advisor and several of his fellow students at Columbia could have been recruited as informants for such a study on the sect-like side of American communism; Alvin Gouldner, at that time a graduate student, was still a card-holding member of the CPUSA and Merton had had close ties to CP circles earlier in his career, and some of his early papers were published in the theoretical organ of the CP, *Science and Society*. Nevertheless, Merton apparently tried to persuade Coser not to follow this line of investigation and he was successful, at least with regard to the dissertation topic. Typically for Coser, he did not abandon his ideas completely; he later published a history of the CPUSA with his friend Irving Howe [Howe and Coser 1957] and he discussed political sects in two of his books: *Men of Ideas* [Coser 1965] and *Greedy Institutions* [Coser 1974].

A second and more detailed outline of the dissertation project submitted to Merton in January 1950 consists of three parts. First, Coser switched from a secret society to another of Simmel's excursions in his *Soziologie*, the one that became translated as 'conflict', despite the fact the German original makes use of the more telling and more concrete concept of *Streit*. In passing it should be noted that Coser, in spite of his sensitivity to the particularities of language, did not

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis A. Coser (The College University of Chicago) to Robert K. Merton, dated 11 October 1949. Merton Papers, op.cit.



comment on the narrowing of the meaning of *Streit* translated as 'conflict', at least not in the published (and shortened) version of his dissertation. He mentioned that he could have easily taken other 'classical sociologists (Marx, Gumpłowicz, Sorel)' as a point of departure and added that the 'purpose is not an exposition of Simmel's system but an attempt to relate Simmel's theoretical exposition to current research tasks and interests, to build a cumulative body of knowledge rather than to "comb through" various theories'.<sup>7</sup>

In selecting the topic of conflict Coser was more easily able to establish Simmel's perspective within the American sociological landscape because conflict had been at the forefront of topics dealt with by the older generation of sociologists. The first part of the dissertation was therefore meant to be devoted to a reconstruction of this concept in American sociology. Coser proposed doing a 'sociology of knowledge' analysis of the prominence of this topic in earlier periods of American social thought by highlighting the crucial role of audiences for understanding conceptual changes. The final book version contains a short introduction in which he gives an overview and interpretation of the disappearance of 'conflict' from the agenda of American sociologists:

While early American sociologists addressed themselves primarily to an audience of conflict-oriented groups—lawyers, reformers, radicals, politicians—later American sociologists have found their audience largely among groups and professions concerned with the strengthening of common values and the minimizing of group conflict: social workers, mental health experts, religious leaders, educators, as well as administrators, public and private. The relative weakness of reform movements in the later period and the rise of bureaucratic structures requiring the services of social scientists in the task of administration have helped to bring about this shift in audience. Accompanying this shift, the self-image of many a sociologist has changed from that of a self-conscious advocate of reform to that of a 'trouble shooter' and expert in human relations. [Coser 1956: 29]

In the second part of the thesis Coser planned to outline and translate Simmel's theory into 'research terms'. He did not elaborate on this part in more detail but wrote further on the third part, in which he wanted to analyse the concrete problems of actual conflicts and their outcomes. The refinement of Simmel's theory was to help make it possible to answer the question of what is integrated via conflicts. Simmel was not specific about this, and examples function as hints at what should be achieved:

Conflict might integrate the two contending parties within themselves (a strike may strengthen the union and strengthen management) or it may serve to strengthen the total system (the factory, the community). A conflict may form up the values of the

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<sup>7</sup> Coser to Merton, 22 January 1950, *ibid.* The following quotes are from this source.

conflicting parties but it may also strengthen their common adherence to common values (a strike may lead to the reaffirming of working-class countersymbols, or it may result in firmer adherence to common American ideology).

By restricting the analysis to what Coser then labelled 'overt conflicts', he chose three conflicts for this 'central part of the thesis': 'Labor-management, Negro-White (possibly other minority conflicts), and political conflicts of national unity.' It should be noted that in this letter Coser for the first and only time made use of fourfold tables to clarify his ideas.

Merton approved the outline and Coser started working on his thesis. Over the next four years Coser exchanged several letters with Merton; in some of them he gave additional hints at why he had chosen Simmel as his starting point. One of them is of particular interest because it contains a kind of sociology of knowledge self-analysis by Coser. On 9 September 1952 he answered Merton's request 'to set down in a few pages the reasons which led me to chose [sic] the particular propositions which I selected from the Simmelian work on conflict':

There were, as far as I can discover, three central intellectual experiences which influenced my general orientation prior to any extended concern with and knowledge of specifically sociological theorizing. (1) An early exposure to and involvement in Marxian thought and Marxist social movements with its emphasis on Praxis in general and Praxis of struggle in particular. Linked with this, an early habit of thinking against, thinking polemically and valuing behavior which conflicted with accepted standards, norms and expectations. (2) The experience of Nazism and, more particularly, the experiencing of what Gleichschaltung of thought, the exclusion of any possibility for dissent, for the expression of conflicting views, means to modern society. Gleichschaltung of mind since then has appeared even more horrible to me than the more immediate manifestations of Nazi cruelty and inhumanity. Engineering of souls, as Stalin called it, had [?] come to mean, since the middle thirties, the perhaps central danger which we face. It seemed to me then, and it still seems to me today, that the regimentation of spontaneity through manipulation, the engineering of acquiescence, is indeed the main and ultimate threat in this age.

(3) During that period I became acquainted with the work of a number of—mainly 19th-century—thinkers, among whom Tocqueville was probably the most important one. They developed a pluralistic political theory, stressing the need for 'secondary institutions', for a dispersion of centers of power into many units, for combating the accumulation of power in one central point. I derived from Tocqueville as well as from later political thinkers such as the guild socialists and syndicalists the conviction that the 'good society' can only be one in which power is dispersed as much as possible, in which there are conflicts among various power-holding groups, in which the clash of interests, of values and ideas would permit maximum freedom.

...

I have, perhaps, said enough to make clear why I was deeply stirred when I read Simmel's Conflict essay some 5 or 6 years ago. This essay led me to a study

of all of Simmel's thought. Simmel led me to question many of my earlier 'marxist' (sic!) views as to the need for the total involvement of the personality in social groups. I began to see more clearly why it is only in and through the 'Kreuzung sozialer Kreise', (the conflict between various groupings within society to which participants belong only with a part of their personality) that freedom has a chance to be preserved. Only a multi-group society, I now felt, one in which group members participated only segmentally, could be a free society.<sup>8</sup>

This letter, which Coser feared might grow into an intellectual autobiography, proves that his concentration on Simmel instead of Marx as the point of departure for what then became the conflict approach in sociology was not determined by the mood of the time. In the first half of the 1950s in the United States, writing about conflict was in itself an aberration and avoiding Marx a common trait of the professoriate. Coser, who had moved to Brandeis University in 1951 while still working on his thesis, could have been one of the interviewees in a sociological study headed by Paul Lazarsfeld about the reactions of college and university faculties in the social sciences to the hysteria of McCarthyism. Lazarsfeld and his co-author Wagner Thielens Jr. [1958; cf. Coser 1960–1961] found widespread conformity among faculty members, who avoided mentioning certain controversial authors—and Marx was the quintessential controversialist of that era—for fear of becoming victims of the anti-communist purges. Coser's *Functions of Social Conflict* did not share such an approach. In it one finds references not only to Marx but also to Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, and an elaboration of the mechanism of scapegoating.

While working on his thesis Coser continued to play a role as a public commentator. Together with his friend and sometimes colleague at Brandeis, Irving Howe, in 1954 he initiated a new magazine to publish writing by non-communist leftist authors. *Dissent* came into existence partly owing to money provided for this endeavour by another European refugee, Joseph Buttinger, who had managed to transform himself from an Austrian underground activist of a modest working-class background into a member of the upper strata of American society by marrying the heir of a wealthy family, who herself became a prominent psychoanalyst with credentials as a supporter of the anti-Nazi underground (and was even portrayed in a movie featuring Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave and Meryl Streep).<sup>9</sup> For *Dissent* Coser contributed several of his shorter pieces, mainly on political topics. For a while he signed these articles as Lewis Coser, whereas in sociological publications he added the abbreviation of his middle name Alfred to distinguish Coser the sociologist from Coser the public intellectual. Strict adherence to Max Weber's distinction between value-free scholarship and value-laden public commentary

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<sup>8</sup> Coser to Merton, 9 September 1952, *ibid.* There is another letter from the same day with different content.

<sup>9</sup> *Julia*, directed by Fred Zinneman, USA 1977.

made Coser separate his two roles visibly. Only in later books containing his collected essays did both Cosers show up undivided [Coser 1967, 1974, 1988a].

When the *Conflict* book finally came out in 1956, published by The Free Press, the reception was friendly but not enthusiastic. Only a decade later, however, a new generation of sociologists adopted it as one of their favourites and earned its author a considerable sum in royalties, enough to buy a summer house in Cape Cod's Wellfleet. In Herbert Gans' overview of sociological bestsellers, Coser's *Conflict* is found in the upper ranks and is the only theory title among the bestsellers by, at that time, living American sociologists [Gans 1997]. According to Coser, *Conflict* had sold over 100 000 copies by 1984 [Rosenberg 1984: 44].

The *Conflict* book examines 16 'propositions' taken from Simmel's work and analyses them according to recent empirical research with an eye towards necessary refinements, which are offered at the end of each section in the way of reformulated propositions. With regard to the causes of conflict, Coser states that in a given system of inequality the weaker members are more inclined to start questioning the legitimacy of a given distribution of resources if ways to express grievances are scarce and social mobility is restricted. Conflicts will become violent if groups are engaged in what he calls 'nonrealistic' issues, meaning conflicts about core values or conflicts enduring over longer period of time. On the other hand, 'realistic' conflicts can be settled non-violently because compromises are possible. Violence and the duration of a conflict are connected; enduring conflicts are those where the goals of opposing groups are expansive, the degree of consensus over the goals is low and competing parties cannot accept their adversary's symbolic points of victory and defeat. Otherwise conflicts can be shortened if leaders intervene, whether because they are aware of the costs of continuing the fight or they are strong enough to ask their followers to settle for a compromise. Coser devotes much room to the function of conflicts both for the struggling parties and the social system at large. Increasing levels of conflict strengthen the boundaries of the parties involved, deepen the centralisation of their internal organisation, suppress dissent and improve the solidarity of the group. With respect to the system to which the competing groups belong, Coser stipulates that the more differentiated and functionally interdependent a unit is the more often conflicts will occur but mostly at a low level of intensity and violence. Therefore, regular but minor conflicts can bring forward innovation and creativity, vent hostility before it can polarise, establish normative regulations to settle conflicts, increase awareness of realistic issues, and multiply the number of coalitions between the ever increasing numbers of voluntarily established social units.

Together with Ralf Dahrendorf, and joined later by Randall Collins, Jonathan H. Turner and several others (none of them formally his disciples), Coser became the representative of conflict sociology, despite all the differences between the disparate collection of individuals specialising on this topic. Quite recently Turner paid tribute to Coser's continuous relevance as the originator of several still vivid theoretical formulations [cf. Turner 2013: Chapter 11].

Coser's first book remained the only one that was truly monographic. Almost all his later publications, and, as noted, there were many, are much more Simmelian, so to speak. Simmel's singularity in the history of social thought has been the essay, sometimes even very long essays, and the same is true for Coser (and his teacher-friend Merton). One could question whether any of Coser's sociological essays would make it into print in one of the discipline's leading journals nowadays; the intended consequence of the widespread conformism of style and presentation in the peer-review procedure is that it bans texts that are good reading because they do not stick to what a reviewer might approve. Even when a book by Coser was on a particular topic and was not just a collection of essays, it was composed in a way that each chapter could be read independently, and so that together they portray relatively complex and multifaceted constellations. *Men of Ideas* came out nine years after *Conflict*, immediately before Coser rose to the upper ranks of the field of sociology. It was his first book on the history of social thought and the first in which he demonstrated his competence as a sociology-of-knowledge virtuoso. The first part of the book analyses the emergence of what around the same time German sociologist Jürgen Habermas had investigated as the structural change of the public sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit). It is not a criticism when I point out that Coser did not quote and most probably was not aware of Habermas' 1965 book [1965]. This oversight rather indicates more than anything else that Coser had closed his German books rather firmly after leaving his native country. If and when he recognised German authors they must have come to his attention via personal encounters or through English-speaking forums. Germany no longer interested Coser and his travels to Europe seldom brought him there.<sup>10</sup>

Different to Habermas' approach, Coser's 'Settings for Intellectual Life'—the title of the first part of *Men of Ideas*—is much more concerned with the emergence of the role of the intellectual, broadly defined, than with the public deliberations of citizens: salons, coffeehouses, the Royal Society, and the structures and institutions in which authors and readers came together through different new forms of distribution and exchange are described and analysed. Coser was not afraid to cover in one chapter the political sect of the Saint-Simonians and, jumping forward in time and across the ocean, and in the next chapter to proceed to 'Literary Bohemia: The Early Years of Greenwich Village' [cf. Coser 1980; Coser et al. 1982]. The second part of the book explores the relationship between intellectuals and the power structure, mainly using examples from the 19th century, whereas the third and final part is devoted to the intellectual in contemporary America.

Obviously Coser included several of his long-lasting interests in this study, which established him as the leading analyst of the changing role of intellectuals in modern societies. His devotion to novels resulted in his editing a reader, first

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<sup>10</sup> Very late in his life he at least received recognition from Germany when Humboldt University made him an honorary graduate [Lepsius 1994].

published in 1963, which contains selections of literature as instances of a more detailed analysis of what sociologists are striving for in a more conceptual form [Coser 1963].

It has been mentioned before that during the late 1960s Coser managed to bridge the gap between the insurgents and the established in American sociology.<sup>11</sup> The *Conflict* book earned him recognition from both sides as an authority on questions of sociological theory, and because of his relative marginality he bonded well with the next generation [cf. Powell and Robbins 1984; Blau et al. 2003].

Coser left Brandeis in 1968 to spend a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto before he took up the post of distinguished professor at the New York State University of Stony Brook on Long Island, where Rose Laub Coser got an appointment as a professor at the same time. Both Cosers remained there until their retirement, at which time they resettled in the Boston area where Lewis accepted the position of adjunct professor first at Boston College and later at Boston University. His years at Stony Brook were both intellectually productive and professionally successful. His major publication of these years, *Masters of Sociological Thought*, brought together his different interests, which is expressed in the subtitle of this widely used textbook: 'Ideas in Historical and Social Contexts'. The expanded second edition from 1977 consists of 14 portraits of leading men in the history of sociology, from Auguste Comte to Marx, Max Weber, Simmel, Pitirim A. Sorokin, W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. The book also contains an overview of trends in the field in a chapter titled 'Recent Trends in American Sociological Theory', where he covers George Homans, Merton, Parsons, and also some new approaches, such as symbolic interactionism, labelling theory, and Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. The chapters on each thinker are organised in the same way: Coser starts with a 'capsule summary of the master's work' before offering a short biographical sketch and then elaborating both the intellectual and the social contexts in which the particular men developed their ideas. In his foreword Merton ranked Coser's *Masters* side by side with leading textbooks in other disciplines, such as 'Samuelson's *Economics*, Kroeber's *Anthropology*, and Sutherland's *Criminology*' [Coser 1977: vii], and indeed Coser's *Masters* has been used widely in American universities and abroad. One could even speculate to what degree later publications on classical authors in the field imitated the Coser format.

Coser received several honours and benefits: He spent time as a visiting professor in Berkeley, Norway, Great Britain and France, was selected for a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto in 1968/1969, and was elected president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP, in 1968) and the American Sociological Association (ASA, in 1975).

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<sup>11</sup> None of the nineteen social theorists from the Sixties generation in Sica and Turner's collection [2005], however, mentioned Coser at all. In Calhoun's voluminous *Sociology in America* [2007] Coser is mentioned only in passing.



His presidential addresses in these posts did not pay lip service to their respective constituencies but rather challenged the core convictions of the members of the two professional bodies.

In August 1968 Coser spoke in Boston before the SSSP, presenting a paper titled 'Unanticipated Conservative Consequences of Liberal Theorizing' [Coser 1969]. (He challenged the romanticism of the advocacy demonstrated by the particular sociologists that were most likely to belong to this special-interest assembly. The defence of matrifocality, serial marriage, and high divorce rates among dwellers of inner-city ghettos as traits of a 'culture of poverty' is for Coser a

nearsighted concentration on allegedly 'functional' consequences of deviant and variant sub-culture life style. ... Moreover, such liberal sociologists have unwittingly become proponents of what is in fact an ideology, and an ideology that has conservative functions, in that it can only serve to 'keep the lower classes in their place', that is to impede social mobility. [Coser 1988a: 32–33]

In his ASA presidential address, delivered in August 1975 in San Francisco and titled 'Two Methods in Search of Substance' [Coser 1975b], he was comparably outspoken, but again with only a minimum of polemics. He criticised both the quantitative mainstream and the far less numerous adherents to ethnomethodology for 'foster[ing] the growth of both narrow, routine activities, and sect-like, esoteric ruminations'. Both trends are for Coser 'an expression of crisis and fatigue within the discipline and its theoretical underpinnings' [Coser 1988a: 3]. For the mainstream he focused on the recent stratification analysis with its use of path analysis and admonished it to forget the 'socio-political mechanisms through which members of different strata monopolize chances by reducing the chances of others' [Coser 1988a: 8]. An analysis that builds its findings on the distribution of advantages and disadvantages on the individual level only will overlook this wider context and its workings. For Coser, such restrictions are 'rooted in the prevailing American ideology of individual achievement' [Coser 1988a: 9]. The ethnomethodologists, on the other hand, are reproached for their 'esoteric language' and their sect-like behaviour, which sets its members apart from the unconverted, but without delivering insights comparable to the Freudians, a similar sect-like group of students [Coser 1988a: 12]. 'By limiting itself to trying to discover what is the actors' minds, it blocks the way to an investigation of those central aspects of their lives about which they know very little.' [Coser 1988a: 14]

Coser did a service to his discipline not just through criticism. He also tried to console unaffiliated, disoriented and alienated young sociologists by publishing a letter to them in one of the leading sociological journals. In it he offers some advice. First, no sociologist should do alienated work, and should resist agreeing 'to work on problems which are not your own choosing' [Coser 1988a: 275]. Second, one should avoid selecting research topics for their alleged 'relevance'. Only if we sociologists follow our own commitment to a 'disinterested search



for truth' may we finally help 'to overcome at least some of the impediments to human growth and human dignity that have been the burden of all previous history' [Coser 1988a: 277]. The third piece of advice is directed at the search for generalisations and opening up new windows. Even in highly specialised work, one needs to look to the work of neighbouring disciplines and, as far as possible, to strive to arrive at generalisations. Finally, Coser commented at length on the question of the political engagement of sociologists and elaborated a point he made several times over his career:

What I have in mind is the tendency in some circles to demand a merging of the role of sociologist with that of citizen; the tendency to assert that anybody who insists on the specificity of the scholar's role is not a full and responsible citizen, or a whole human being. This, I submit, is utter nonsense. I am indeed committed to the calling of sociology, but I have never felt that the discipline claimed more from me than a segmental participation. Science is not one of those institutions which claim the total man. I can be a devote sociologist and no less devoted husband, father, democrat, socialist, gardener, or what not. Similarly, I can play an active part in the political affairs of the nation, I can be an impassioned social critic, an advocate of this or that conformist or nonconformist position, without necessarily implicating my role as a sociologist. [Coser 1988a: 283]

Coser returned, so to speak, to the experiences of his 'generation unit' after retiring from Stony Brook. In the *Masters* chapter on Mannheim, Coser made reference to this particular concept, which points to the fact that even within one generation its diverse parts may experience the same things differently: 'They share a field of vision, yet see it differently.' [Coser 1977: 434] His generation unit of émigrés forced out of their native countries by the Nazis received extensive coverage in Coser's *Refugee Scholars in America* [1984]. Again Coser made use of the essayistic portrait, but this time with a much wider scope. He primarily analyses scholars who came from German-speaking countries, but includes Aron Gurwitsch and Roman Jakobson, too. He sketches portraits of eight psychologists and psychoanalysts, five sociologists, sociological milieus and schools, and covers economics from the Austrian School, describes Jacob Marschak's role in bringing econometrics to life, and even looks at more outlying figures in economics such as Peter Drucker, Alexander Gerschenkron, George Katona, and Karl Polanyi, and pays tribute to political scientists as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Hans Morgenthau. Coser also transgresses the narrow boundaries of the social sciences by including chapters on writers, such as Hermann Broch, Thomas Mann and Vladimir Nabokov, and on scholars from the humanities and philosophy. The oldest refugee scholars (besides the novelist Mann) that Coser included in his sample were the psychologists Max Wertheimer (born 1880) and the theologian Paul Tillich (born 1886), and the youngest were of his own age: Karl W. Deutsch (born 1912) and Albert O. Hirschman (born 1915). It would have been possible to include a portrait of Lewis Coser in this collection of eminent

immigrants to the United States, and only modestly restrained Coser from doing this. In one particular area Coser would have figured on par with those covered in his book: In a paper he presented on this topic Coser claimed that the specific achievement of refugee scholars in America was their contribution to de-provincialising American academia—and Coser himself did even more to accomplish this than others of his generation unit [Coser 1988c].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Coser's introduction to his *Refugee Scholars* highlights the impediment and difficulties of adjusting much more strongly than in his chapters devoted to particular individuals, where their successes prevail over their difficulties. In a comparative analysis of the generation of refugee scholars, I was able to demonstrate the incredible rate of success in detail [see Fleck 2011: Chapter 4, 111–164]. In a ranking by reputation, Coser occupies the 26th position out of more than 800 German-speaking social scientists [ibid.: 156].

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